

LONDON SOCIETY'S NAUGHT.

One of the principal features of the present London season is the dancing. The latter is being conducted on an entirely new plan, of a distinctly oriental character. Instead of the men taking any active part in the dancing, as heretofore, they merely look on, seated in comfortable easy chairs, while the dancing is done for them, not by Indian Nautch girls or Egyptian almeas, but by peeresses of the realm and by ladies of birth belonging to the very smart set of London society.

The fad originated about two seasons ago, when it became the custom to invite to private entertainments some well-known professional dancers such as



LADY RUSSELL.

Lady Lind, Sylvia Gray or Mary Lloyd, on the understanding that she should volunteer a pas seul. Society's jaded palate was tickled. The cursory glimpses of flying heels and swirling skirts, which were common enough on the stage, acquired an altogether new significance in the drawing room.

The barriers having thus been lowered, and a species of social intercourse established between the women of the world and the lady of the stage, the former quickly made up her mind to avail herself of the opportunity thus presented to acquire the art of skirt-dancing, which, owing to its thinly veiled suggestiveness, appeared to find such favor with the masculine element of society. There has always been and ever will be a kind of rivalry between the society belle and the footlight favorite, and the former is invariably convinced that were she to be permitted to avail herself of the peculiarities of dress, or rather undress, of the professional ballerina she would far outstrip the latter in the race for masculine admiration.

Having once mastered the delicate intricacies of the pas seul and become an adept in the art of maneuvering the skirt with that mixture of coyness and suggestiveness which constitutes the basis of the so-called skirt dance, the society woman commenced by giving a manifestation of her terpsichorean skill to those of her acquaintances who belonged to her own set, and encouraged by their praise—women always encourage one another when there is something risqué to be done—she finally determined to extend the sphere of her audience to the masculine element. The temptation to seize such an opportunity of exhibiting a trim pair of ankles—especially in an epoch of long skirts—was too great to be withstood. Pretty Mrs. Crutcheley, whose husband lost his leg in the Sudan, and who therefore cannot dance himself, started the fashion at the annual Guards' burlesque entertainment, excusing herself on the ground that the performance was for the sake of a charity. The fad spread like wildfire. To-day at least seventy per cent. of the girls and young married women of society are proficient in the art of skirt dancing, and the portraits of Countess de Grey, Countess Russell, and of numerous other high-born dames, taken in the act of flinging their feet in some picturesque pose



LADY DE GREY.

of the pas seul, are to be found in most of the London shop windows alongside of pictures of Countess de Grey, Lady Lind, Sylvia Gray and other professional favorites of the stage.

So great indeed is the craze for skirt and ballet dancing that by next year no family with any pretensions to social rank and station will be complete without its "dancing girl." Even little misses under twelve years of age are being taught the art, and the professional dancing masters and mistresses, instead of making their young pupils acquainted with the waltz, the quadrille, the reel and the lancers as hitherto, impart to them the art of the ballet. It is quite an ordinary sight nowadays to find the fashionable dancing academies thronged during the afternoon with a crowd of children all under the age of fourteen, promiscuously about in perfect time and tune, dressed in the tights, the gauze skirts and the flat-soled slippers of the professional ballerina. They are all the children of parents of aristocratic birth and social eminence. What the ultimate outcome of these new-fangled dancing lessons will be it is impossible to predict. There are fears, however, that they will have the effect of causing hysterical longings in the minds of the growing girls, who may, when they attain the years of discretion—or rather indiscretion—find it difficult to content themselves with the privilege of holding up their heads in society after having enjoyed the inestimable advantage of kicking up their heels in amateur ballets.

Thus the ladies of blue blood and high degree, by learning the music hall business and putting their knowledge into practice, are getting even with the music hall artists for their presumption in marrying into the aristocracy. Not

content, moreover, with fading audiences composed of their friends and acquaintances, they have now branched forth into public performances—for the sake of sweet charity, of course. Only the other day the countess of Russell, a full-fledged peeress of the realm, indulged in a skirt dance at the Royalty theater, in London, for the purpose of raising funds for the National Lifeboat Institution. With Lady Godiva's comprehensive precedent in her mind's eye, and remembering that the ride of that old English heroine through Coventry's streets was accounted as a meritorious action, owing to its having been performed for the sake of charity, Lady Russell saw no reason why a countess should not expose her ankles and even her clocked stockings in a skirt dance for the benefit of a noble institution. Her ladyship wore black accordion skirts, a black and silver bodice cut extremely low, and a white wig. Her performance was a thoughtful and even, one might add, intellectual bit of dancing. It had evidently been committed to memory with the greatest care, and although the effort of recollection was occasionally a minute or two behind the music, no single step was forgotten. It was danced meditatively and cautiously, as if she half doubted the treacherous nature of the boards, and although she did not let herself go, or fail to forget that she was a peeress of the realm with a dignity to maintain, yet she certainly did not shrink the high kicking. Up went her blue-blooded little feet above her aristocratic chin, and round flew her skirts above her aristocratic knees.



MRS. RUSSELL.

which enabled the public to perceive that she had made a concession to May-fair propriety—such as it is—by donning entirely black underwear.

Later on in the same evening she appeared in another piece and title, "The Pantomime Rehearsal," where she performed another dance—or, to speak more correctly, a regular music hall bit of the song and dance order. The song was about a looking-glass, and the countess held a mirror in her hand while she danced and sang, with the result that the reflection of the glass darted all over the stage at the rear of her in a mad career while she was dancing. During the second portion of the entertainment she wore yellow skirts, with heliotrope underskirts and hosiery, and a similar costume was affected by her sister, Mrs. Dick Russell, who shared with her the honors of the evening.

Both young women are very attractive, their charms consisting in pretty baby faces, large eyes, a winning smile and neat figures. Both have already acquired a notoriety of a disagreeable character. The countess of Russell last year was the central figure of a cause célèbre in the divorce court, having brought a suit against her husband, the earl of Russell, for a judicial separation. Unable to influence either the judge or the jury by the horrible insinuations she made against her husband, she lost her case and was condemned to pay the costs of the trial.

It is said, however, that she has now succeeded in persuading her husband to pardon and forget her cruel aspersions on his character, and that a reconciliation between the two is imminent. If this be the truth, it can only be regarded as an evidence that the earl has more heart than head, and that he is of a singularly forgiving nature. Perhaps, however, he was among the audience at the Royalty theater on the night when she performed her pas seul, and that unwittingly she danced her way back into his heart.

Besides the names above mentioned there are many others that could be cited in order to show how thoroughly the fad of skirt and ballet dancing has taken hold of the feminine element of London society. What the craze will ultimately lead to it is impossible to say, but there is every reason to fear that neither the tone, the taste nor the morals of the English race will be improved by London society naught.

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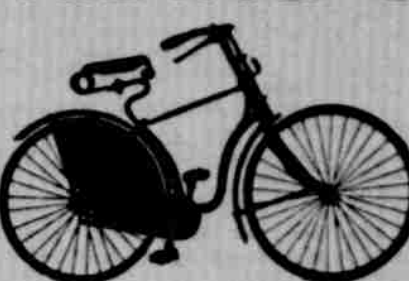
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